

UNCOVERING A GHOST TOWN

THE LOGGING INDUSTRY ESTABLISHED FORGOTTEN SETTLEMENTS IN THE MOST REMOTE CORNERS OF OUR FORESTS.

A FLORENCE NATIVE ENDEAVOURS TO DISCOVER ONE ELUSIVE TOWN.

AMONG THE TREES

BY ZAC BURTT

EVEN AT AN EARLY AGE, I was a sucker for a mystery, and this one really started when I was 15. I found myself at a party hosted in a room at that old school house turned museum. The space was full of dusty artifacts, the air heavily perfumed with the scent of aging paper. I sat watching dust particles float through the air, trying to stave off boredom as my attention drifted from the party. I scoured the room, desperately seeking someone my own age.

Out of curiosity, I began scanning the exhibit shelves, when I noticed the words, "Booth. Memory ... or Myth?" suggestively burned into a wood panel. The panel was adorned with an intricate illustration depicting a robust little town alongside a large mill. The discovery roused me from my apathetic trance. This mystery was calling to be unriddled. What was Booth—and why should we remember?

It didn't take much to persuade a few friends to join me on a jaunt

out to the old town site. An old area map we found showed the town of Ada in close vicinity, giving us a good reference point to begin our search.

Following 13 miles of scenic and winding Canary Road, through Maple Creek Valley's pastured farmlands and forest and down to a dicey one lane hugging the Siltcoos lake shore, we finally ended up in Ada. We trekked across nearly a quarter mile of train trestle, pulled along by the rhythm of the railroad ties. Siltcoos Lake stretched out on either side, urging us to its southeast shore. There, we came to the tunnel.

Its arched entrance eerily loomed before us. We entered cautiously, fearing a passing train might force us to take desperate (and very muddy) measures to avoid injury. Each footstep, ethereal in its echo, drew us closer to the light and the promise of Booth at the end of the tunnel. ➤



PHOTO BY DAN HABERLY

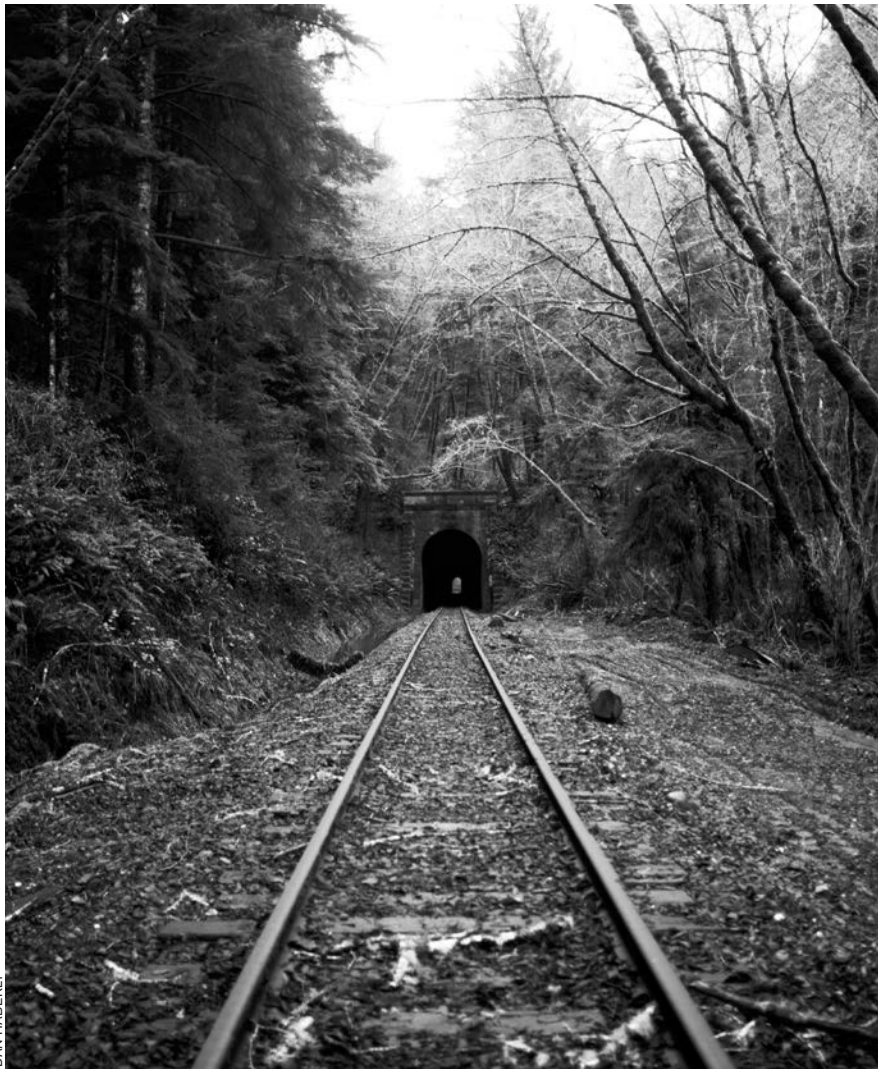
We made it-or had we?
According to our map,
this *was* Booth. But,
there we found... nothing.

Not an old dilapidated house, no rusted out train car in the bushes. No broken-down remnants of the mill, not a sign reading, "Here once stood Booth." There was no evidence of a town at all. Had we misread our map? Accidentally ended up in the wrong place? How could a whole town vanish without a trace? This was far from the end of my search or my fascination with Booth.

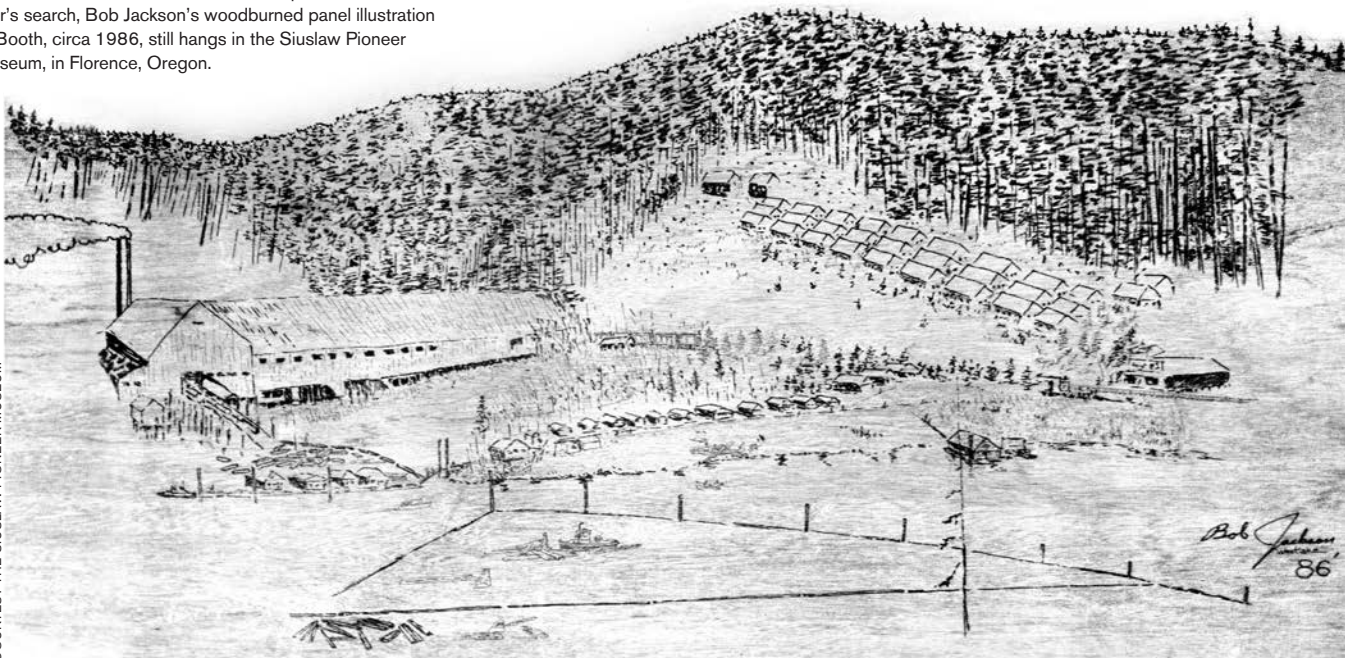
Over the years, I returned on a handful of occasions, hoping something would appear in those woods. A town with no road leading to it had to be near the railroad tracks, so every time I ventured out, I stuck with the same strategy: follow those tracks, and look for a clue. But any evidence of Booth still escaped me.

facing page: The tunnel near Ada, built by Southern Pacific in 1914, was the most direct route to Booth by foot.

top: The view as you enter Booth today is now completely reclaimed by the forest. Neatly white washed cabins once lined the hill on the left. **bottom:** The inspiration for the author's search, Bob Jackson's woodburned panel illustration of Booth, circa 1986, still hangs in the Siuslaw Pioneer Museum, in Florence, Oregon.



DAN HABERLY



COURTESY THE SIUSLAW PIONEER MUSEUM

Life went on—kids, jobs, marriage. I'd rarely think about that old town. But a few years ago, I moved to Westlake, on the banks of the same Siltcoos Lake as Booth. Some nights, I'd sit at the end of the dock and see the lights of Ada Resort on the other side of the lake. Thoughts of Ada turned to thoughts of its mysterious old neighbor and once again, Booth entered my consciousness.

Eventually, I decided to cross the old trestle and go through the tunnel again. But this time, I enlisted some friends: Kyle Terry, the Programs Manager for the Siuslaw Watershed, and Dan Haberly, the photographer for The Arch. Like most things in life, a different perspective is sometimes all it takes to find what you've been searching for.

With Kyle's knowledge of topography and native plants, I was suddenly able to see tell-tale signs of the town that had eluded me on previous visits. He pointed out old roadways in the forest, slithering through the woods like snakes, so close they would have bitten me. We found dozens of perfectly aligned pits on the forest floor, which must've been dug when they dismantled the town, taking everything down to the plumbing in the ground. As we explored, the story of Booth's rise and fall came to life.

It was clear we weren't the first (or the hundredth) people to return to the town site, as only old bottles, bricks, and unidentifiable chunks of tin

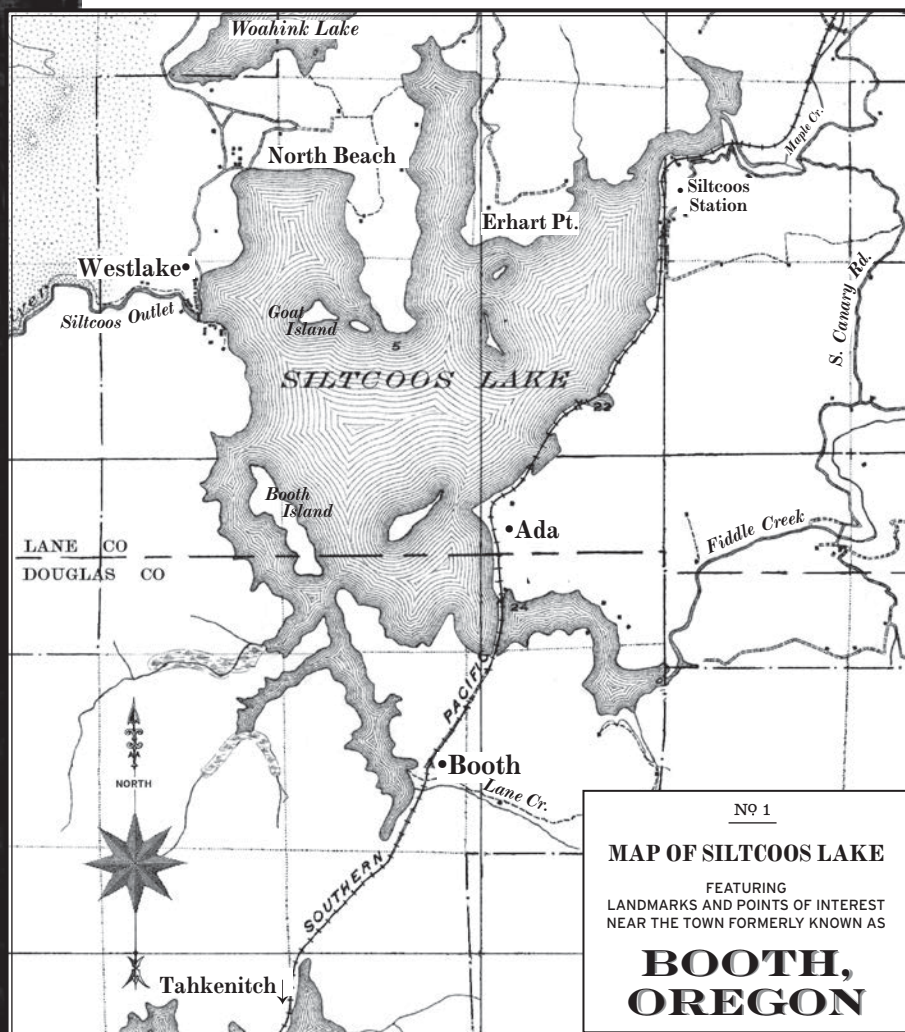
PHOTOS BY DAN HABERLY



top: The remnants of one of the old roads in Booth are some of the only evidence left. **below:** Kyle Terry estimates the age of the trees in Booth, helping to determine which areas were clear cut during the 1930s. **facing page right:** The author further investigates the old town site.



and aluminum were left behind. But treasure seekers hadn't claimed everything—daffodils still sprouted through the thick covering on the forest floor, most certainly planted by the families who once lived on the hill. As we pieced together clues on the hillside that day, the shadow of Booth began to materialize, and for the first time, I could visualize the place where hundreds of hard working people sawed out a living in the forests of the Oregon Coast during the Great Depression.



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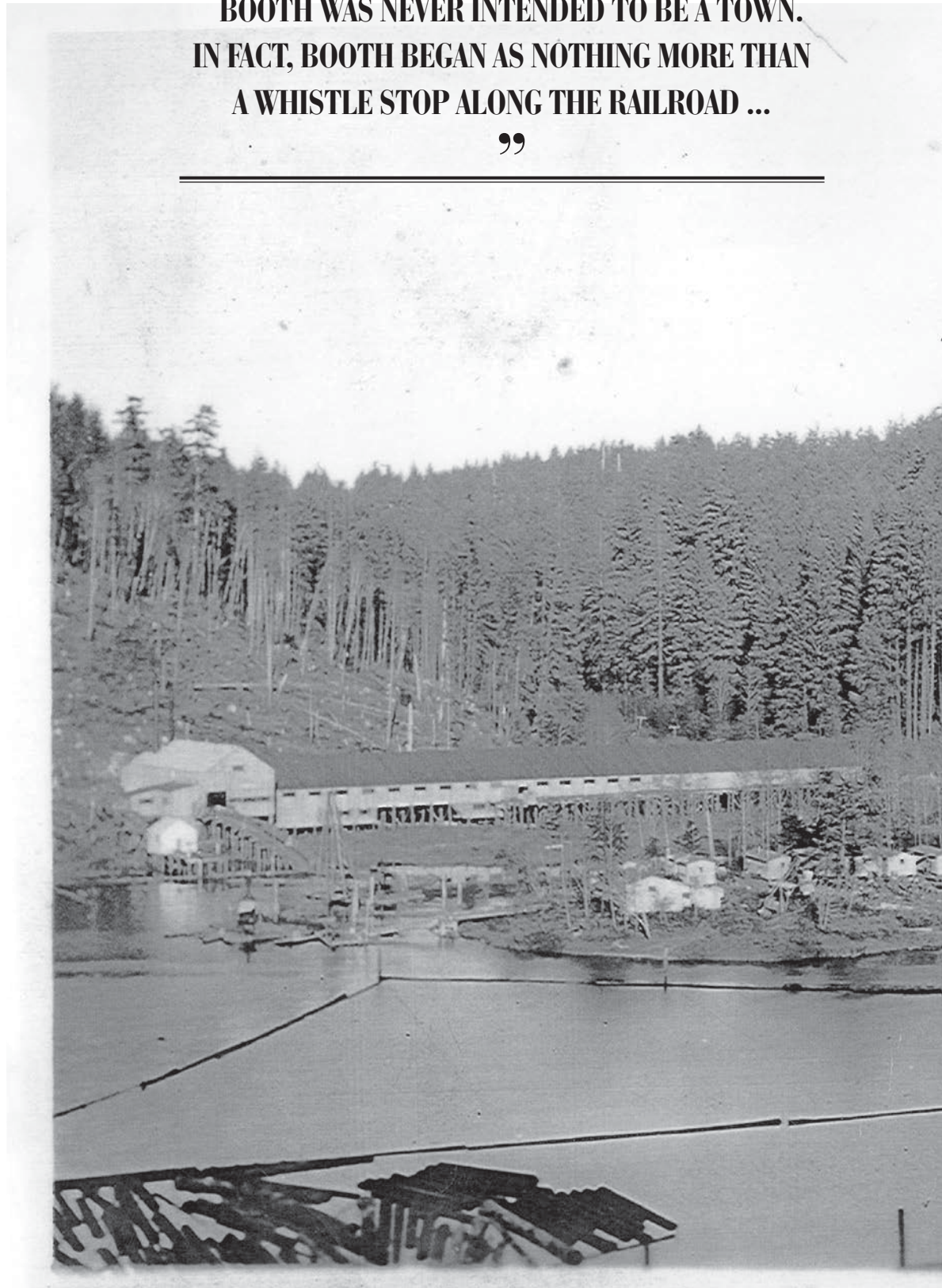
Booth was never intended to be a town. In fact, Booth began as nothing more than a whistle stop along the railroad—a place where the Southern Pacific trains would stop to collect logs that had been harvested from the forests surrounding Siltcoos Lake. That stop, along with Booth Island, was named after Robert A. Booth. Booth, the founder of Booth-Kelly Lumber Company of Eugene and elsewhere, purchased the island in the early 20th century.

For years, Booth remained just a whistle stop, a quiet corner of the far south end of Siltcoos Lake, surrounded by many small dairy farms and homesteader families trying to eke out an existence. When the stock market crashed in 1929, and the Great Depression began, it became especially tough to carve out a life there. Most families in the southern Lane and northern Douglas County were barely making ends meet. They survived on whatever they and their neighbors could grow or hunt. Money from the “outside world” was scarce.

Further north up the coast, the residents were having their own problems—spruce was in short supply, and Arthur Magnuson and Gordon Murdock, the owners of Tillamook Spruce Veneer Co., needed a plan. As luck would have it, one of the area’s biggest timber companies, Crown Zellerbach, was sitting on more spruce trees than it knew what to do with. And even luckier for the people in this area, there was a good supply of spruce surrounding the southeast end of Siltcoos Lake.

Just before the Depression, the Zellerbach Company,

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creators of cardboard egg cartons and folded paper towels, merged with Crown Willamette Paper Co. to create the publicly traded company Crown-Zellerbach Corporation. Crown-Z, as the locals called it, had been logging up around the Booth stop of the Southern Pacific for years and happily made a deal with Magnuson and Murdock. They would provide the land and timber, and Magnuson and Murdock would dismantle their mill in Tillamook and bring it

down the coast to Siltcoos Lake.

It would have been easier to find workers if the mill moved to one of the established communities on Siltcoos Lake, but spruce doesn't grow where you tell it to, and the best mill site happened to be very remote and virtually unpopulated. Since there was no built-in workforce, one would have to be transplanted. In the midst of the Depression, people were desperate for work, but asking the 100 plus workers needed to log the timber and

run the mill to commute to this remote part of the forest wasn't a viable solution. Instead, a town would have to be built.

Local newspapers mention excitement growing as pilings were driven into the lake in preparation for the new town. This quiet corner of Oregon was soon abuzz with the sounds of pounding, sawing, singing, and cussing. The Southern Pacific railroad delivered the mill to the new location, and many of the workers from Tillamook came

Booth in the 1930s, shown here from an east facing hillside across Booth Arm. Note the "log boom" in the lake where the harvested spruce logs waited to be milled. Tillamook Spruce Veneer Box Mill is pictured in the swamp on the left. A boardwalk connects the Crown Zellerbach offices, shops and accommodations for loggers, that lie on the spit of land, center, to the grocery, school, post office and mill workers cabins on the hill.





DAN HABERLY

2020

top: The small town of Booth is gone, and its "Main Street" is pretty quiet today.

This once busy trestle now sees just one train a day when the Coos Bay Railroad runs from Coos Bay to Eugene

bottom: Booth, in its prime, during the 1930s photo taken from a hillside south of town.



COURTESY THE SIOUX PIONEER MUSEUM

1930s



1938

top: In 1938, Booth was bustling, with its own railroad stop, the Red & White general store and several houses that grew up around a mill. **bottom:** The same trestle, busy with train cars in the photo opposite bottom, now silently traverses Lane Creek.

2020



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Float houses like those used for permanent housing in Booth are used largely today by fisherman or those looking for a remote getaway, like this one that rests alone, in the middle of Tahkenitch Lake. Some float houses from Booth were dismantled at the close of the mill and moved to Tahkenitch Lake.

with it. The rest of the operation consisted of locals who gladly uprooted their families to move for steady work. During the depression, Tillamook Veneer's 50 cent/hour rate didn't rival what the "timber beasts" or "brush apes" (as the loggers were somewhat disparagingly referred to) were making from Crown-Z. But the "sliver pickers" (the pet name the loggers gave their less imposing counterparts) recognized it was paid work at a time when this was rare, and thus not to be taken for granted.

As the town grew, many loggers built float houses. These log-supported houses were attached to a long elevated boardwalk, along with a machine shop, saw filing shack,

cook house, and bunkhouse for loggers without families. The Crown-Z offices and some homes built on stilts for some of the "higher-ups" in the operation also stood along the boardwalk.

If you followed the boardwalk, you'd reach the general store. The "Red and White" had all the sundries of a store in town. Goods came in via railroad, and workers could buy on credit. This worked out well for the store, but it wasn't such a good arrangement for the workers, as their purchases were drawn from their paychecks. Sometimes, when pay day came, there wasn't much of a paycheck left.

No alcohol was sold in town, but with a short trip through the

train tunnel and over the trestle, you could get your libations from Ada. Or if you could find your way home after "a few," the floating Blue Goose Tavern was the favorite spot for revelry on the east side of the lake.

Behind the Red and White, Booth even had its own post office. A distinguishing characteristic that made a settlement "a town" in those days. It supposedly served at least 400 people at its peak as a hub for residents of Booth and the entire surrounding area.

The two-room schoolhouse, donated by Magnusen, was up the hill. At peak enrollment, there were 30 students in grades first through eighth. Older kids took an early morning boat to

Westlake, and then took the bus to Gardiner High School, which must have been a dark ride home in the winter. A recreation hall and gymnasium were located behind the school. Community dances and meetings were held there, along with basketball games against surrounding communities. Word is, the boys from Booth didn't lose very often, and their winning streak wasn't just because of their prowess on the court. It's perhaps unwise to beat the home team when getting out of town is not a quick and easy process.

Then there were the neatly tailored white homes for the mill workers among the stumps of the recently logged spruce. Initially, 28 homes were built,



COURTESY THE SIUSLAU PIONEER MUSEUM

1933

but more were added. Each held a family whose head of household worked in the mill. At the top of the hill were two much larger houses: one for Magnuson's family, the other for Murdock's. Their positions on the top of the hill overlooking all of Booth definitely made the chain of command very clear.

And so for a decade, this tiny, remote corner of Siltcoos Lake was one of the most populated areas in Douglas County. It was born out of one national emergency, but another led to its demise. The Great Depression helped provide ready labor for the mill, while World War II was the catalyst contributing to the loss of those same laborers. Booth always maintained a

larger female workforce than any other area mill at the time, though most of the skilled laborers were men, who would eventually be sent off to fight for their country.

So, on March 31, 1943, the last carload of product was loaded, and the mill's green chain came to a halt. Magnuson and Murdock dismantled their mill and brought it to nearby Tahkenitch Lake. As for the workers, they took everything they could. Many cabins and float houses were dismantled and reassembled in more populated areas on Siltcoos and Tahkenitch Lakes. What couldn't be transported was later claimed by treasure seekers, and over the years, the rest was claimed by forest.

top: An example of an early float house built at Booth, Cliff and Loraine Worthylake's first home, dated June 1933. **bottom:** This cabin, built at Booth in the 1930s, was dismantled and rebuilt on the north side of Siltcoos Lake.

Finally, I had found the site of the historic town that had eluded me all those years, but I hadn't quite solved the mystery. I still wondered about the people who had once called Booth home, the residents who were hardy enough to spend a decade of their lives carving out an existence on the most remote corner of a remote lake on the Oregon coast. I wanted to understand the rhythms of their daily lives, from the teachers to the shop owners to the loggers.

As it turns out, plenty of former Booth residents are the parents, grandparents and great grandparents of many of our neighbors. Some shared their stories with a wider audience, publishing books like *Hells Hole and Battle Beach* by Bob Jackson and *Westlake Girl* by Larry and Frieda Wampler, while others simply passed their stories down to their children and grandchildren. The town may be lost to time, but their words live on. And, like the daffodils at the forgotten site of Booth, these stories still surface, if you just look closely. 

Look for the continuation in our next issue ...



DAN HABERLY